Interim Charge 4:

Study the prevalence of online courses and degrees in higher education. Examine how institutions providing online courses and programs are accredited, particularly courses and programs originating from states other than Texas. Evaluate how students whose courses and degrees are primarily online perform in terms of persistence and degree completion versus students who take courses in traditional classroom settings. Study labor market outcomes for students with primarily online courses and degrees versus more traditional programs.

1. What are the existing barriers to online learning for students and faculty? What have institutions done to alleviate and eliminate these barriers?

The barriers include: 1) the burden placed on faculty who offer courses that have both face-to-face and online at the same time, and 2) constant different pedagogies are used in identifying the "best model" for online teachings.

To address these concerns, we have increased the frequency of interactions with the students, i.e. discussion sessions and the greater use of flipped classroom style teaching.

2. What information and data is available regarding long-term student success for those taking courses primarily online -- both in general and specific to Texas institutions?

The majority of the programs at the School of Health Professions are accredited through their professional accrediting agencies. In recent years, they have adopted outcome reporting as their form of measurement for tracking program/student success. We use graduation rates, 1st attempt board certification exam pass rates, and employment rates. These metrics along with periodic employer and alumni surveys help the program administration to plan for continual changes and modifications.

3. With institutions having shifted instruction to online-only in the spring of 2020 because of the pandemic, what lessons have been learned?

An increasing digitation during this period has highlighted the importance of proficiency and experience using online learning systems, such as Zoom, WebEX, Canvas and Panopto. There is obvious generational gap in the use of technology. For example, in general, the millennials were very comfortable adapting to online courses while the non-traditional students exhibited apprehension and anxiety.

Due to the uncertainties of the pandemic, we implemented front-loading of lectures in hopes that labs and rotations will resume in the summer. This has paid off. However, looking forward to fall, the reverse will occur, i.e. front load the labs as much as we can while we still can and move the lectures towards the back.

4. What are the challenges related to technology, quality, accessibility or other considerations? The Committee is seeking the perspectives of college/university administration, faculty and students.

The challenge remains in finding a platform that can effectively encourage and develop a sense of online community for the students. The online space and limitations of specific LMS software such as Canvas can slow down interaction and provide limits to functionality, while also adding to the time limitations and frustrations experienced by both faculty and students. We are now seeing the effects on the lack of face-to-face social interactions among students and faculty which invariably will lead to increased anxiety, depression, and other psychological disorders.

5. Post-pandemic, will the recent shift to online courses lead to expanded online demand and capacity?

Many nontraditional students who have work or family commitments will continue to utilize the online platform for self-development. Online learning allows students to work at a time, place that is compatible with their learning needs. Even with the traditional cohort, some students prefer a hybrid or blended format to regulate their learning. With the latter, the student has the ability to self-regulate by planning monitoring and evaluating their behavior, cognition and learning strategies.

6. How can the Legislature address gaps in equity in accessing reliable, affordable Internet access?

There are currently many countries that offer free Wi-Fi services to their people. Croatia is a good example. They offer incredible download speed of 14Mbps to anyone. But since that may not be possible here in the US, we can start by providing technology funding to schools in low income areas and increase scholarship opportunities to minority and low income families.

7. What sort of differences in quality are we seeing for online nursing programs without a clinical component versus those that do have one or are done in person?

N/A

8. What sort of privacy exists for students utilizing some of the more popular online curriculum packages?

Many of the educational curriculum software need vetting by a centralized institutional department, as practiced at MD Anderson. This minimizes security risks and privacy concerns.

9. Has recently adopted legislation on Open Educational Resources been able to make an impact on the quality of online education yet?

 N/A

10. Do small and rural community colleges have the financial capability to switch to online, as well as in-person, classes, degrees, etc.?

N/A

11. How does the impact of COVID-19 affect the small and rural community college's ability to offer online classes and make other changes to adapt to the pandemic?

N/A